Article

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A brief walk through the changing role of Physical Education in the National Curriculum

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Abstract

This paper discuses the role Physical Education (PE) in a changing culture of school-based education, particularly across Key Stages 3 and 4. The authors recognise that PE has to find its niche in order to survive as a formal subject given that its current position in the curriculum, having been marginalised for many years, may now be under serious threat (Kirk, 2010). However, the strength of PE could lie in its ability to support academic achievement (Sallis, *et al.*, 1999; Trudeau and Shephard, 2008) and thus convert the current perceptions of PE as having low academic status into an opportunity for PE and its professors to revise and improve the academic requests made of pupils in PE. The paper concludes that if there is a desire to incorporate more learning activities into PE which cross-over and draw upon core subject areas, such as English, Maths and Science, then a more engaging learning experience may be afforded – by virtue of what PE demands from pupils and consequently, offers them educationally. Such a strategy could place PE at the heart of learning and teaching rather than at the periphery, but in order to fit in with education and learning it has to branch out from exercise provision and entertainment. A changing demand for physical engagement across all subjects may point to exciting times academically and professionally for the PE teacher.

Introduction

Since the inception of the state National Curriculum, the role and contribution of Physical Education (PE) has been the subject of "animated debate" (Smith and Parr, 2007:37). One reason for this might be the lack of consensus about the subject's definition (Capel, 2000). Nevertheless, PE secured its place as a key aspect of the educational landscape following the introduction of the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) in 1992 (Lockwood, 2000). The National Curriculum itself was introduced in 1990 following the Education Reform Act 1988 (Green, 2008) and offers a framework of ten subjects that all state-maintained schools are required to implement (Kelly, 1990; Maw, 1993). It was the government's intention to standardise the school curriculum throughout the country (Butt, 2009) with Mathematics, English and Science identified as 'core' subjects and PE amongst the

cluster of 'foundation' subjects (Green, 2008). Penney and Evans (1999) argue that the curriculum was constructed with pre-determined subject hierarchies and traditional educational priorities in mind. Similarly, Capel (1997) remarks, that given the sequential introduction of each subject, it was unsurprising that PE was among the last to come on-stream. PE was nonetheless afforded statutory status and continues to claim a role in the development of all young people to become "successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens" (QCA, 2007:189).

The role of PE: in pursuit of purpose?

The role of PE remains an area of deliberation as the teaching profession struggles to establish a definitive purpose for the subject (Alderson and Crutchley, 1990; Kirk, 1992; Green, 2008; Bailey and Kirk, 2009; Whitehead, 2010a). These on-going debates might illustrate the subject's "fundamental insecurity" within the curriculum (Houlihan, 1991:239), despite its statutory status. The myriad of potential aims and outcomes for PE might, in themselves, contribute to the philosophical incoherence surrounding the role of PE (Capel, 1997). However, towards establishing some kind of structure the NCPE summarises its current aims into *key concepts;* competence, performance, creativity and healthy active lifestyles, and *key processes*; developing skills, making and applying decisions, developing physical and mental capacity, evaluating and improving, and making informed choices about healthy, active lifestyles (QCA, 2007:189).

To date, there is no agreed hierarchy between these different aims (Whitehead, 2010a) and the role of PE is, perhaps expectedly, influenced by teachers' personal philosophies and rationales (Capel, 2000). Indeed, teachers' professional identities are underpinned by their personal values and beliefs (Rice, 2002) and, in practice, negotiating the plurality of aims might require a degree of prioritisation by the PE teacher. Furthermore, the opportunities that PE teachers endeavour to provide might be circumscribed, or privileged, by the school's geographical location; being inner city or rural (Dodd and Palmer, 2009). Nonetheless, a key aim of PE is stated to be promoting lifelong physical activity (Fairclough, Stratton and Baldwin, 2002) which is an area of questioning for this paper.

Almond and Whitehead (2012:63) claim that PE's ultimate role is to encourage young people to establish "purposeful physical pursuits…as an integral part of their lifestyle". Additionally, the Association for Physical Education believes that PE should provide the foundations for lifelong adherence to physical activity and healthy living (AfPE, 2012). A pressing justification for these claims might stem from the ostensible role that PE can play in "alleviating the problem of obesity" (Lear and Palmer, 2008:85), a problem that has seemingly reached epidemic

proportions in childhood (Bluher and Kiess, 2006). Between 1995 and 2010, the prevalence of childhood obesity increased from 11% in boys and 12% in girls to 17% and 15% respectively (NHS Information Service, 2012). PE has a long-standing and widely accepted relationship with health promotion (Waddington, 2000; Green, 2008); a relationship which is perhaps now more urgent than ever. However, it is questioned what level of responsibility PE may have for the life-style choice of obesity i.e. is obesity really a PE problem? (see Evans, 2003; Houlihan, 2006; Kirk, 2006; Lear and Palmer, 2008).

Physical Education and lifelong physical activity

Schools are recognised as "key institutions for the promotion of physical activity" (Taymoori and Lubans, 2007:606). The causal relationship between PE and lifelong participation in physical activity is frequently articulated (Corbin, 2002; Trudeau and Shephard, 2008; Evans and Davies, 2010). However, despite such widespread beliefs, there remains a "dearth of evidence" substantiating such claims (Green, 2012:1). The opening statement of the NCPE, entitled The Importance of Physical Education, claims that PE "develops pupils' competence and confidence to take part in a range of physical activities that become a central part of their lives" (QCA, 2007:189). Indeed, the 'lifelong participant' may well recall and acknowledge PE for opening the doors to physical activity, but, given the plurality of additional factors influencing participation (Allender, Cowburn and Foster, 2006), it is perhaps unlikely that PE will be recognised for its exclusive, even predominant, role in sustaining lifelong adherence. More critical than this are Sellers and Palmer (2008:197) who dismiss much of the 2007 NCPE document as "nothing more than a set of unsubstantiated dogmatic claims" based on idealism and wishful thinking and being of very little actual guidance for teachers at the 'chalk face'. Green (2012:4) astutely notes that studies supporting the taken-for-granted assumptions about the relationship between PE and physical activity outside school seem firmly-rooted in a "language of contingency"; that is, the potential of PE to encourage or influence lifelong participation, as opposed to offering any empirical evidence for claims being made. Of course, PE can only "lead the horse to water" (Clark and Sprake, 2011) but physical educators are urged to take notice of which activities have the greatest 'carry-over' into adult life (Fairclough, Stratton and Baldwin, 2002). Perhaps this advice should also extend to curriculum developers across all subjects.

Early experiences of sport and physical activity have "profound implications" to patterns of subsequent participation (Trimble *et al.*, 2010:40). Interestingly, only a minority of adults participate in activities they encountered in PE (Kirk, 2005). Achieving this central aim of the NCPE, that of creating and harnessing pupils' enthusiasm to engage in lifelong physical activity, may depend in part on the manner in which PE is delivered (Fairclough, Stratton and Baldwin, 2002). So the

characteristics in PE, and motives for engagement in PE, as experienced by pupils, would seem critical for PE to have a meaningful and distinctive educational contribution. In working towards this end there seems to be a difficult balance to strike, currently, between entertainment through sport and exercise, and education and learning. Detrimentally, the former does seem to have trivialised PE as an academic subject at the cost of the latter. Greater awareness of this difference may help to realise the kind of engagement expected of pupils if PE is deemed to be part of their education and learning in schools. Equally the same might be said of the attitudes from the school teaching hierarchy towards the PE staff and what their subject has to offer. Within the National Curriculum PE may have languished for too long as the timetable slot [subject] where pupils can 'let off steam', 'not be judged' or be exposed to 'the kind of discipline they really need' for them to occupy a place in school socially and get through the day.

Roles and characteristics of PE: a changing landscape

Historically, Physical Education has undergone continual transformation (Houlihan, 2008), a process inevitably linked to the political dimension of education (Gradstein, Justman and Meier, 2005; Furedi, 2007). From the military-style drills of the past to the competitive and inclusive lessons of the present (Coakley and Pike, 2009), the characteristics of PE have been shaped by political ideology (Armour and Kirk, 2008; Johnrose and Maher, 2010). For instance, King (2009:148) discusses how, traditionally, the priority for PE within the Conservative Party was/is to emphasise competition with a focus on "elitism", whereas the Labour party view PE as a vehicle to address wider concerns of social inclusion, health and economic regeneration. Ultimately, the roles, expectations and subsequently the characteristics of PE are subject to a political tug-of-war.

The political affects upon PE can be felt by teachers in their day to day teaching in terms of expectations of their role and contribution to learning and the overall experience of being at school. Deliberations about the educational legitimacy of PE remain an issue of deep-seated contention (Houlihan, 1991; Kirk, 1992; Reid, 1997; Bailey, 2005; Green, 2008) and despite its formal recognition in the curriculum PE has been in a "state of decline and marginalisation" for many years (Green, 2008:45). This may be because the contribution that PE makes to other aspects of education is often used as a justification for the subject's legitimacy (Green, 2008) which, according to Capel (2000), only weakens the status of PE in the curriculum. PE constantly finds itself in a support role or being supplemental to other subjects. Perhaps predictably, therefore, in an attempt to justify its curriculum position, PE has exploited the 'new' theoretical terrain of the National Curriculum for every beneficial outcome it can possibly achieve (Houlihan, 1991).

The inherently physical nature of PE reputedly limits its potential to contribute to 'academic' achievement (Kirk, 1988). The fact that pupils spend only 2% of their school lives in PE (Capel, Leask and Turner, 2009), might be attributable to the introduction of school league tables placing pressure on schools to prioritise academic subjects (Naidoo and Wills, 2000). This peripheral existence of PE is perhaps ironic. Concerns about increasing PE time, at the expense of academic subjects, as having a detrimental effect on academic attainment are, in fact, "groundless" (Trudeau and Shephard, 2008:268). On the contrary, evidence suggests a positive relationship between increased PE time and pupils' academic achievement (Sallis, *et al*., 1999; Trudeau and Shephard, 2008). If this is the case, then the very academic results that schools are under pressure to achieve might be realised, not by marginalising, but by emphasising the importance of PE within the curriculum and actively promoting it.

Throughout the twentieth century, however, PE was afforded little more than a Cinderella status (McNamee, 2005) and was urged to "redefine itself as an academic subject" (Reid, 1997:6) in order to assert its educational worth. With PE teachers' professional standing in jeopardy, a new orthodoxy emerged, which can be illustrated by the significant rise of examinable PE, and suggests an implicit acceptance, on the part of PE, that academia holds superiority within the curriculum (Green, 2008). From a sociological perspective, this might be viewed as curricular-hegemony. More recently, a suggested rationale for PE has been that of the development of 'physical literacy', which can be described as "the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to maintain physical activity throughout the lifecourse" (Whitehead, 2010a:18). Consequently, physical literacy, embodied within PE, could provide a "sound platform" for lifelong physical activity but also "an ideal springboard" for those with outstanding potential (Whitehead, 2010b:163). In other words, physical literacy could offer invaluable opportunities for pupils of all abilities to establish lifelong adherence to physical activity. As a means to achieve this aspect of the NCPE, physical literacy might be the light at the end of the tunnel amidst the search for consensus about the role and contribution of PE. However, as outlined previously, teachers' philosophies of PE vary a great deal (Capel, 2000) and their beliefs about what PE should be like in terms of learning and teaching; its demands and expectation as an academic subject, will impact upon pupils' experiences of learning in PE. For example, when every pupil at Key Stage 3 expects to have homework in core subjects; English, Maths, Science and most other foundation subjects, why is there no homework for PE? Such a simple act may help to raise the academic status of the subject and its teachers as active contributors to overall educational outcomes. The point being that PE seems to very effective at creating its own intellectual property for academic study by pupils at school, but far too readily gives this up to other subjects.

Conclusion

PE has been characterised as a "political football that can be kicked back and forth at the whims of government" (Johnrose and Maher, 2010:15) resulting in irratic demands upon PE for political reasons. The NCPE has been reviewed three times since 1992 (Smith and Maher, 2011) and is currently under review again (DfE, 2012), prompting yet further philosophical debates regarding the justification and educational value of PE. The fact that the role, contribution and justification of PE remains an issue of debate and deliberation only serves to highlight the vulnerability of PE within the curriculum (Houlihan, 1991).

Kirk (2010:121) proposes three possible futures for PE; 'more of the same, radical reform, or extinction'. It would seem that, in order to avoid the third outcome, there is a need for policy makers, physical educators and academics to establish a long-awaited consensus about the role of PE. Thus far, the survival of PE in the curriculum lies in its professed ability to deliver a multitude of aims (Capel and Whitehead, 2010). This plethora of aims and the varied ways in which they can be interpreted and implemented might be the root cause of the problem. For instance, in relation to the aim of promoting lifelong participation, the NCPE may be over ambitious, vague and idealistic (Sellers and Palmer, 2008), particularly since any evidence of a causal effect is speculative (Green, 2012). PE can undoubtedly impact positively on the development of young people (Bailey, 2009) but there remains a need for the profession to identify and articulate a clear vision and purpose for PE (Whitehead, 2000). While the debates continue, it is perhaps appropriate to ask whether PE can, at all, establish "purposeful physical pursuits" (Almond and Whitehead, 2012:63) that are at the heart of education and learning when the subject itself seems trapped within its own pursuit of purpose.

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JQRSS: Acknowledgement Footnote

1. *Author's reflective comment*: The issues raised in this article stem from a genuine interest, even concern, about the future of physical education. I am again privileged to contribute to the JQRSS and I am grateful to Clive Palmer for the continued support and encouragement.

2. *Author profile*: Andrew Sprake graduated from the University of Central Lancashire with a First Class Honours in Sports Studies. He is currently enrolled on a PGCE course at Liverpool John Moores University in the pursuit of becoming a teacher of physical education.

3. *Dear reader*, if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic the authors can be contacted on: Andrew Sprake A.J.Sprake@2012.ljmu.ac.uk and Clive Palmer capalmer@uclan.ac.uk.

Reviewer's comments:

The fact that this paper raises a healthy critical debate about the changing role of PE in schools by someone currently in teacher training is refreshing and promising for the future of the subject. It seems that Andrew may be motivated to implement some changes that he realises are important, or at least is prepared to experiment with them which may be what is required if he is to have a career as a PE teacher, i.e. that the subject is to survive. Whilst the discussion is drawn from secondary research it flags many valuable opportunities for primary research activity to get under way in this dynamically changing subject in the school environment. This may be a clear strength of this contribution in this journal and intended readership.